Lafayette Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549

President: Oliver Hamlin (o. 283-6822; h. 284-1446)
Editor: Shirley Thomson (o. 935-2270; h. 284-2995)

Vol. XVI, No. 2
May 1989

President's Message

It's almost time for our Annual Meeting and potluck dinner again on May 9. Try to be with us for this event and join the fun. Look for details elsewhere in this newsletter.

I want to thank members of the Board of Directors and committee chairs for their support and guidance through the year. In particular, I would like to convey our gratitude to three of our longstanding and faithful Directors who are retiring this year, namely, Betsy Willcuts, Elizabeth Johnston, and Lee Schell. Their services will be missed, but I am sure we can call on their knowledge and experience as resources in the future when the appropriate occasion arises. Names of three nominees for directorship have been proposed, and the election of Directors and officers of the Board will take place at the Annual Meeting.

We are trying to build up a reserve fund for future use on a historical building and/or museum of some sort. To this end, we have recently become more aggressive in moving our savings accounts to a place where they will earn more interest. We might as well take advantage of the higher rates while they last. Another source of funds for LHS might be the solicitation of more Life Memberships available at $100. We have a few members in this category, and we could always accommodate a few more. Give it some thought. We also need the continued support of our regular members.

Hope to see you at our May 9 dinner meeting and at some of our other outings. Don't forget the Ardenwood Farm Tour on Saturday, June 3!

Ollie

Oliver D. Hamlin

Tuesday, May 9, 6:00 p.m.

ANNUAL MEETING AND POTLUCK DINNER

Lafayette Veterans Building, Lower Level

NOMINATIONS

With hearty thank-yous to retiring directors Betsy Willcuts, Elizabeth Johnston, and Lee Schell for their good work, the Nominating Committee proposes the names of the following three people for membership on the Board of Directors:

George Ely
Shirley Thomson
Joseph "Jop" Van Overveen

Nominations for office on the Board of Directors are as follows:

President – Oliver Hamlin
Vice President – Ray Peters
Rec. Secretary – Ruth Dyer
Cor. Secretary – Jack Bailey
Treasurer – Nancy Holtzapple

Elections will be conducted on May 9.

PHOTOS ON DISPLAY

Historic photographs telling the story of roads and transportation in the local area – to be selected and arranged by Alice Breckling – will be displayed at the Lafayette Library during May.

ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP

A workshop sponsored by the Contra Costa Country Historical Society is scheduled for two full days – May 6 and 20 – at the Oak Park School, 1700 Oak Park Boulevard, Pleasant Hill. Enrollment is $25 (including materials) and is to be limited to fifty participants.

Oral history is an invaluable tool for enabling members of historical societies, genealogists, and family historians to preserve for future generations a vital aspect of our rapidly disappearing past. This workshop provides a rare opportunity to learn how to prepare for and conduct professional quality interviews.

Elaine Dorfman, a teacher of oral history at Vista Community College and staff member of the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California at Berkeley will instruct.

Please call 254-2295 for further information.

ACTIVITIES / EVENTS OF OTHER CONTRA COSTA HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

May 7 ..... Martinez Historical Museum celebrates Christian Brothers' 110th Anniversary at the museum, 1005 Court Street, Martinez ($10 donation).

May 18 ..... San Ramon Valley Hist. Soc. Program Meeting. Call 837-0369 for info.

May 20 ..... Moraga Hist. Soc. day trip to Gold Country – includes Grass Valley, Nevada City, North Star Powerhouse and the Empire Mine State Park ($23). Call Lynn MacFadyen (376-4042) for information.

June 11 ..... Orinda Hist. Soc. Annual Meeting

July 4 ..... Clayton Hist. Soc. – Auction at the museum, 12:00 noon. Call 672-0240 for more information.

July 9 ..... Concours d'Elegance de Lafayette. Call Chamber of Commerce for info (284-7404).

July 22-23 ..... Lafayette's 21st Birthday Bash with sidewalk sales, food & wine fair, and "chocoholics corner." Call 284-7404 or 284-1734 for info.

Sept. 24 ..... LaFiesta Parade

Annual Meeting and Potluck Dinner

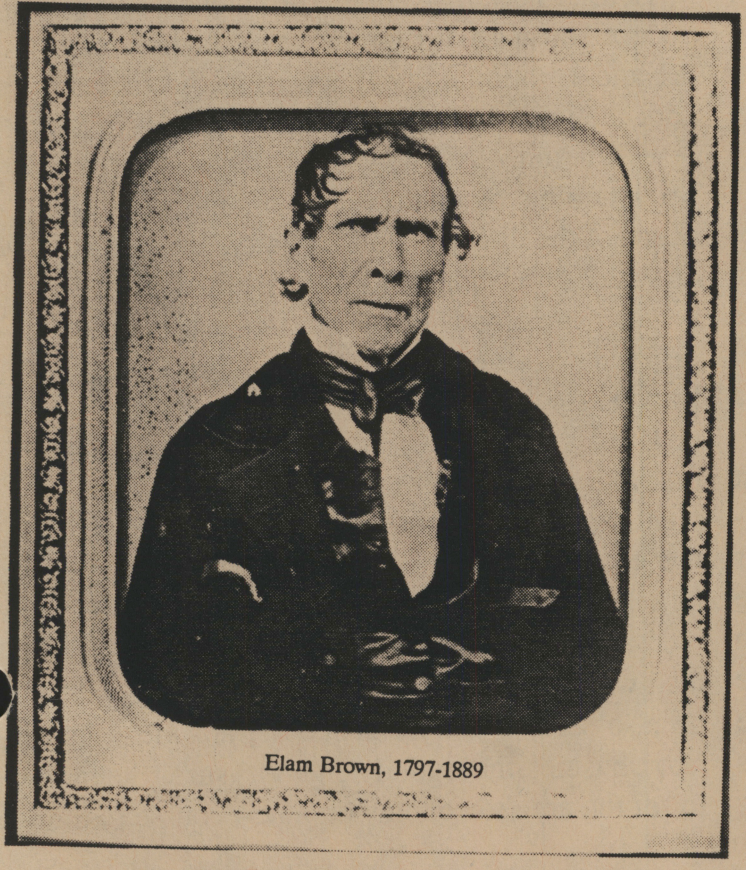
Tuesday - May 9, 1989 - 6:00 p.m.

6:00 - Refreshments and Social Hour — 7:00 - Dinner

8:00 - Program
Lafayette Walking Tours Update — Betsy Willcuts
The Harmonizers in Barbershop Style Singing
A mixed group of singers, the Harmonizers will sing "oldies" and "goodies" in good old-fashioned harmony.

Please bring a dish of six to eight servings for each person attending. Hearty salads, meat or seafood entrees, and side dishes are needed. Board members will bring desserts, and dinner drinks will be provided. There is plenty of oven and refrigerator space, so dishes will be served as the cook intends. Please also bring a serving utensil for your dish (with your name on it).

Potluck dinner chair is Richard Johnson (283-0199). Please call Richard or Program Chair George Wasson (283-4420) if you have any questions.

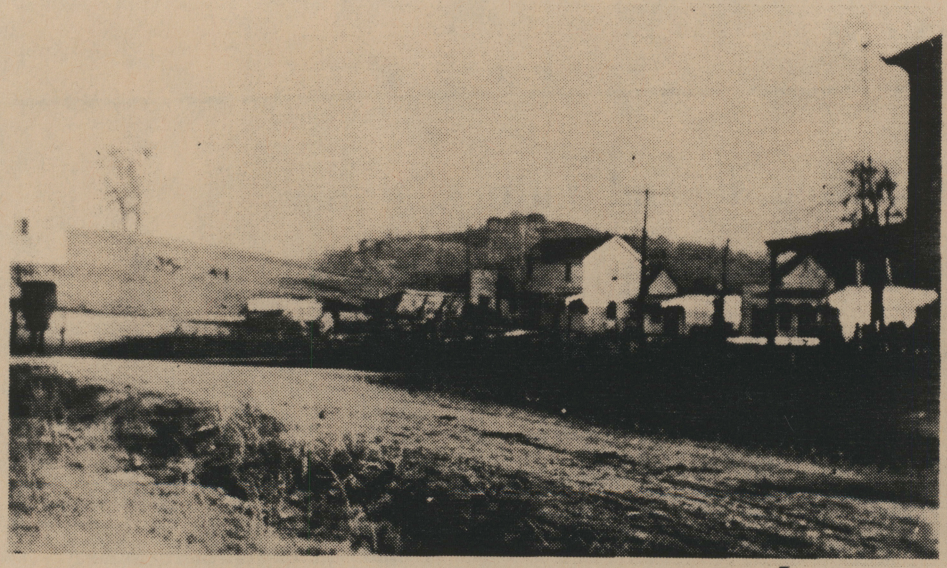


Elam Brown, 1797-1889

"GRANDPA" BROWN LOOKS BACK

"Amid all the various surroundings and positions through life I have never struck or been struck, never run for or from man or boy. I have had but few law suits or contentions. I have never bet a cent on a race or cards, and never dealt in stocks. I was never intoxicated by liquor, although I was raised in a tavern, but I have never dealt in the article since. I have never cheated a man, knowingly, out of a dollar, but the reverse has occasionally occurred. I do not intend this as a boast, but as an acknowledgement of the blessing bestowed upon me through a long life, by my good and benevolent Creator."

—Elam Brown



Lafayette's Plaza Area, circa 1900
From L to R: Way Side Inn, Geils Building, Pioneer Store, porch roof by windmill, Hotel.

Foreground: Road to Walnut Creek, later called Tunnel Road

Above buggy on hill is Good Templars Hall.

FARMING IN LAFAYETTE

by Shirley Thomson

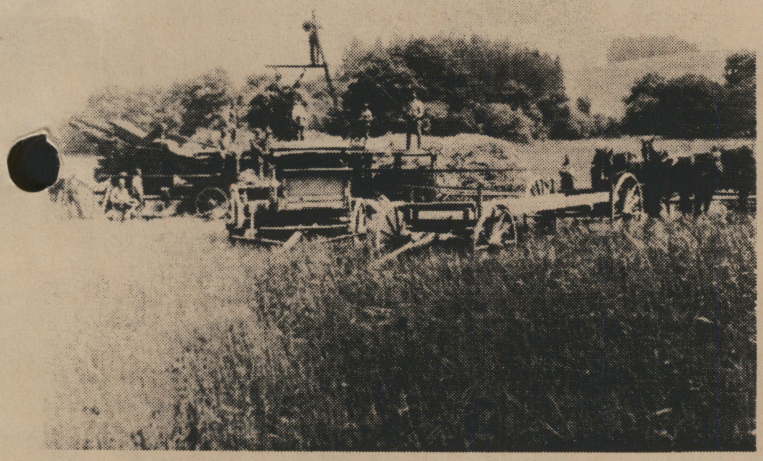
The upcoming field trip to Ardenwood Farm inspired a search of the Society's files for information on Lafayette's early farms. The written record and some fine photographs available in the collection at the Lafayette Library—a few reproduced in these pages—tell the story of farmers and ranchers raising grains, grapes, vegetables, fruits, poultry and cattle, and enjoying occasional honest-to-goodness barn dances. Lafayette's "semi-rural" character, so appreciated in the 1980s, was totally rural not very long ago.

Local histories give credit for the origins of Contra Costa farming to Lafayette's Elam Brown. The first American to settle in the Lafayette Valley, the man who guided much of the local area's first forty years' development, remained a farmer throughout his long life.

Elam Brown learned farming early. This oldest son of a farm family was born in Herkimer County, New York, June 10, 1797. He began his journey westward to the place that would become Lafayette when he was only seven. Beginning in 1804 he helped his father coax a living out of the Ohio frontier forests; in 1818 at twenty-one he ventured alone to Illinois to create a farm of his own. From Illinois he removed in 1837 to newly opened land on the Missouri where it is said he cleared a farm of 180 acres. After his wife died in 1846, he set out once again on the trail west.

"I freely acknowledge my incapacity to solve it," he said in answer to late life questioning about why he had come to this "lonesome place"—Lafayette. He had simply done it; he apparently did not need to understand why: Memories and families called him to come back, but, he said, "All did not change me from my destined western course." He led a wagon train from St. Joseph, Missouri, to California. This last move westward, undertaken at age forty-nine, was a physical, mental, and emotional challenge from the first day until the last when they gratefully arrived in San Jose Mission. At the cost of huge effort, the Brown train crossed the Sierra summit a few days ahead of the ill-fated Donner Party. Ready to get on with establishing a home in the new place, he began to look for available land soon after arrival.

Brown was able to purchase the 3,300+ acres of Rancho Acalanes and three hundred head of cattle (for $900). He focused his efforts on cattle the first year or so, but by the early 1850s he was also planting wheat. With success in growing grain, the economy which until then had been based largely on cattle raising and shipping of beef, hides, and tallow, began to change. Doubtless the man who was first and last a farmer (even when he also served as natural leader, alcalde, legislator, businessman, good neighbor) surely helped to set the area's economy on a new course in the



Mr. Dunn's Thrasher Harvesting Hay in Lafayette, early 1900s. James Bickerstaff, Jennie Bickerstaff's father, standing on top of the crane.

two decades that followed. The time was right. San Francisco's growing population needed daily bread, and the mines and mills were drawing hungry workers to Contra Costa. Forty-niners were coming down from the foothills looking about for more dependable ways to make a living.

Nathaniel Jones, an intelligent and capable man quite as interesting and westward-determined as Brown, also reached the end of his traveling near Lafayette. He came to Happy Valley in 1847 or '48 and Brown willingly sold off about a tenth of his holdings to Jones. They were friends before they reached California, and Jones had married a daughter of the second Mrs. Brown. He was also to take a leading role in the development of the county. Among other posts, he served as Contra Costa's first sheriff.

Twenty years later, the Jones's Locust Farm was described in glowing agricultural terms in an illustrated history of the county: "There is a belt of country extending through Contra Costa County of five or six miles in width, where the small valleys nestling among the hills have a soil as rich as can be, a healthy climate, and scenery of unsurpassed loveliness. In the midst of this Eden of California, the Acalanes ranch is situated, of which Mr. Jones owns 372 acres; 100 acres of as fine valley land as can be found in this State, 150 acres of tillable hill land, and the balance good grazing land; a fine orchard of about five acres of choice fruits, and around his residence some of the largest locust trees to be seen in the State."

Brown and Jones planted fruit and nut trees and vineyards early on. They raised more than enough food for their families and began to reap great quantities of wheat. The increases in wheat production led John Marsh (first American to settle in Contra Costa) to invest in the expanding economy by building a port at Antioch in 1850; farmers hauled wheat to both Antioch and Martinez for shipping. In 1853 Brown set up a grist mill on Lafayette Creek near the present First Street and Golden Gate Way. He continued to experiment; among many farm innovations, he tried new crops such as Chinese sugar cane to be used for cattle forage during the dry season.

Wheat production by large farms such as those of Brown and Jones and by an increasing number of smaller operations remained high until about the turn of the century. By 1900 almost all tillable land in the county was farmed and the success of wheat farming had done much to aid Contra Costa's development. Its economic success provided both need for and means to accomplish the building of roads and communities.

The widening roads and developing communities eventually choked out the real farms. However, people now living in Elam Brown's neighborhood—with a perspective gained over the hundred years since his death—like to stress that there exists among the citizens here a happy consensus to preserve something of its old ways in its "semi-rural" character.

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Sources:

Miscellaneous photos and other materials preserved in the Lafayette Historical Society files in the Lafayette Library.

Illustrations of Contra Costa Co. California with Historical Sketch, Smith & Elliott, Oakland, 1879; reprinted by Contra Costa County Historical Society, 1979.

Mathews, Dorothy, *The Development of Lafayette*, unpublished research paper prepared for History 192, College of the Holy Names, 1970.

ARDENWOOD HISTORIC FARM – LHS JUNE 3 TOUR

Join members and friends of Lafayette Historical Society to share a day of old fashioned sightseeing and picnicking at this 19th century working farm in Fremont.

The present is not always easy to distinguish from the past at Ardenwood. The 205-acre farm site is a re-creation of a late 19th century family farm which was a self-contained, life sustaining place filling needs for food, shelter, and recreation. The interpretive programs at Ardenwood are aimed at developing an awareness of our agricultural heritage and of our inescapable dependence on the land.

The programs at Ardenwood allow visitors to see and participate in all kinds of activities characteristic of a 19th century working farm. There are haywagon rides, domestic animals, blacksmithing, leather and harness working, craft demonstrations, and crop planting and harvesting. The farm also features a unique horse-drawn train, a general store and period food.

There are guides to show the home and other folks on hand to demonstrate various farm tasks.

Schedule:

9:00 a.m... Meet at Stanley School for car-pooling
10:30..... Arrive at Ardenwood
12:00..... Picnic
1:00 p.m. . House tour
P.M..... Return at drivers' discretion

Price of admission, including the house tour, is $5 for adults, $3 for seniors aged 62 and over, $2.50 for children aged 4–18. Children under 4 are free.

We expect to reserve a picnic area for our group's lunchtime picnic. We've arranged a house tour for twenty people at 1:00 (other times are available too).

Please call George Wasson at 283-4420 if you need further information.

RESERVATION FOR THE ARDENWOOD FARM TOUR

Please complete and send reservation to Lafayette Historical Society (Attention: George Wasson, P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, CA 94549) if you plan to take part in the June 3 trip to Ardenwood.

Name:.....

Address:.....

.....

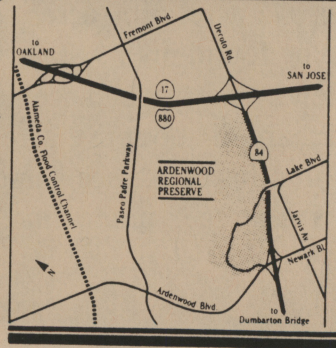
Telephone number: .....

Number in party:.....

I can take ..... *more people in my car.*

I can't drive; please arrange transportation for me. .....

See you at Stanley School at 9:00 on Saturday, June 3!



ARDENWOOD HISTORIC FARM
34600 Ardenwood Blvd.
Fremont, CA 94555
(415) 796-0663

A FARM DIARY

by Shirley Thomson

One of Lafayette's eminent wheat farmers—Henry Toler Brown (1859-1932)—left a diary that relates in its brief notes the rich personal and community life of a successful farm family in Lafayette in the 1890s. An orphaned nephew of Laura Hastings Brown, Henry Toler Brown was raised from age two by his aunt and her husband, Warren Brown, son of Elam Brown. He left law school in San Francisco in 1889 to return home to run the farm for "Auntie" when Uncle Warren died. The 650 acres he managed was located along Brown Avenue and up the hill beyond Deer Hill Road.

For the preserved diaries and explanatory notes about them the Society is grateful for the efforts of Sybil Brown Wilkinson, daughter of Henry Toler Brown. She was generous in making available family records and photographs for the historical record.

The few daily notes selected and shown here go far to reveal local farm life in 1896. There is a clear sense that the notes are simply the facts, straightforward daily entries intended as the writer's record. However, they also tell much about this hard-working, generous man and his wife, Annie Willebrand Brown, and their children, Estella, Lloyd, Chester, and Sybil. Three years of the diaries are available to interested readers in the LHS files at the Lafayette Library.

Wednesday, January 1, 1896

Clear Cold
Sowed wheat on hill in front field, old seeder broke down, had to get Thomson's seeder.

Thursday, February 13, 1896

Clear Frost North wind
Plowed in forenoon, sowed barley in lot in afternoon. George harrowed. . . . Annie set 2 hens on duck eggs.

Sybil Brown and Pearl Christians riding on a hay load to the barn on Elam Brown's ranch. Circa 1910.

Henry Toler Brown 1859-1932

Wednesday, March 11, 1896

Clear Warm
Got up at 3:30 A.M. Put on load of hay out of old Church [church building then located at the corner of Oakland Avenue and Mt. Diablo Boulevard, sometimes used for storage, sometimes for church meetings] *and took it to Oakland to Portugee's. 16 bales 3700 lbs, 9.00 per ton. Got sack barley in Temescal* [between Oakland and Berkeley]. *Brought home rest of Barley left at 4 mile house. Annie got some flowers of Mrs. Hough and chrysanthimums and verbinas and other flowers from Mrs. Bickerstaff.*

Thursday, March 12, 1896

Clear Warm
Sowed barley up at Ranch in flat and two pastures on hill. Sowed 4 sacks. Lloyd harrowed till I got through sowing in afternoon, then I harrowed. At noon I dug up a bed for flowers in front of the house. Annie planted verbinas in it. Auntie had the walnut trees grafted to Persian Walnuts.

Saturday, May 23, 1896

Clear Cool
Horses got out. Had hard job finding them and getting them home. After lunch all went to Martinez with me in the carriage. Got my pay for Jury service, $11.80. Went up to cemetery, planted white verbena. Got home by seven o'clock.

Sunday, May 24, 1896

Clear Warm
Mowed hay in A.M. and in afternoon, till about 4 p.m., when the mower broke down. George [Ware] *bunched hay. Got mower fixed. Fixed fence after supper.*

Monday, May 25, 1896

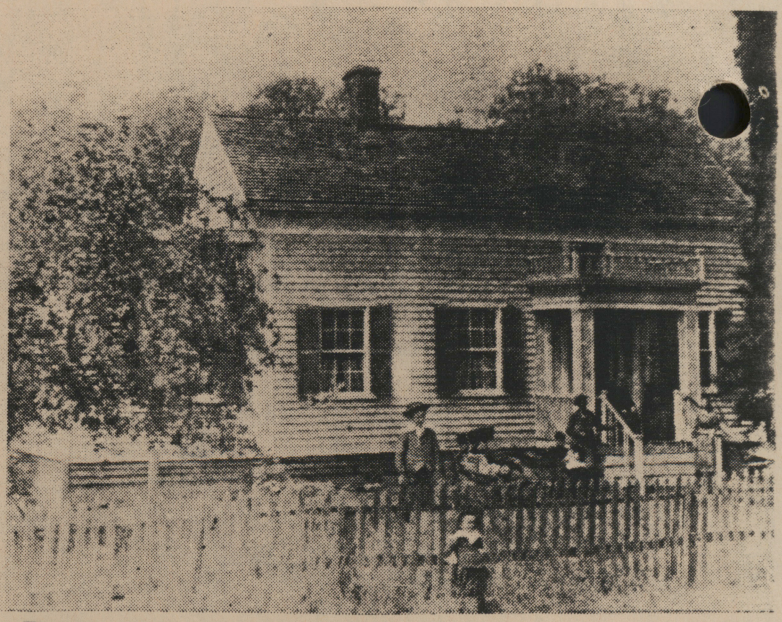
Clear Warm
Mowed till 10 o'clock when mower broke in the same place again. Sent Lee [Isaacs] *for Blankenship's mower at W. Creek. Lee mowed in afternoon. Sent by Thomson for casting for mower. Got it this evening. Fixed knife and ground it. Bill Chiddy commenced working in hay field.*

Tuesday, May 26, 1896

Clear Warm
Fixed mower and went to work by 7:30. Lee mowed today also. Broke down again about 10:30 cogs gave out. P.M. took the machine to pieces, but found the casting from other machine would not fit. Got an order from Thomson to get extras at Baker & Hamilton's.

Elam Brown Property, early 1900s

Mare and colt grazing in field near Brown's home on Hough Avenue. The fence borders Mt. Diablo Blvd.; this scene could be between Hough and Dewing Avenue.



Elam Brown's Home, circa 1893
Henry Brown family (L to R): Chester (front of fence), Lloyd, Sybil (baby) held by mother Annie, Henry Brown, Laura (seated on porch, wife of Warren Brown), her mother, Lois Hastings, and Estella on steps.

Monday, August 3, 1896

Very foggy in morning Cooler
Got up at 4 a.m. Left at 6:30 with load of hay. sold it to Osgood for $7.00 per ton. Got home at 2 p.m. Rested, had dinner and loaded up at Ranch, 17 bales wild oat hay.

Tuesday, September 8, 1896

Foggy Cool
Balers commenced on stack in front field. Geo. went with me to load. Waited for Manuel to press load of wheat hay, 19 bales. Had Geo. throw off top of stack damaged by rain. Took hay to Nash. Left home at 8:30. Got to Nash's at 12:40. Unloaded after dinner. Ate at the Arlington. Got battery and Jane's harness mended. Got rope for hay wagon. Got Allen's Malt. Got home at about 7:30 p.m.

Thursday, December 31, 1896

Showery Cold
Got up at 7 a.m. After breakfast went up to Bickerstaff's & got a couple of songs. Got Jim & Nell shod all round. After dinner Annie & I went to Walnut Creek. Got Auntie white-wash brush, .50. Got steak & chops. Called on Mr. & Mrs. Darling. Got home about 6 p.m. Had supper at 7 p.m. Annie, Stella & I sat up till midnight and saw the new year. Fired the pistol & blew the horns.

Lafayette Historical Society

POST OFFICE BOX 133 LAFAYETTE, CALIF. 94549

MEMBER INFORMATION

last name	first name	spouse's first name
street address	phone number	
city, state, zip code	date	

Annual dues: Please check appropriate box, attach check in the amount shown, and mail to Lafayette Historical Society, P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549.

[ ] $10.00 - Family membership
[ ] $ 2.50 - Student membership
[ ] $ 50.00 - Business membership
[ ] $100.00 - Life membership

ACTIVITIES OF THE SOCIETY

Collect, preserve, and make available to researchers and the public Lafayette's records, historic materials, and photographs

Disseminate historical information and encourage public interest in local history through programs, exhibits, and field trips

Maintain "Old Betsy," Lafayette's early fire engine ~~~ *Conduct walking tours*

Identify and mark historic sites ~ *Publish local history* ~ *Record and preserve oral histories*

PLEASE CHECK AREAS OF INTEREST

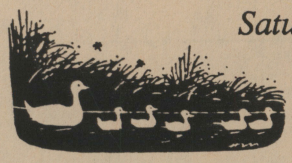
[ ] Archives
[ ] Landmarks
[ ] Fire engine
[ ] Telephone committee
[ ] Other:
[ ] Oral history
[ ] Photograph collection
[ ] Newspaper clippings
[ ] Walking tours
[ ] Annual potluck dinner committee

ANNUAL MEETING AND POTLUCK DINNER

Tuesday, May 9, 1989 — 6:00 pm

LAFAYETTE VETERANS HALL

SPRING OUTING — ARDENWOOD FARM AND PATTERSON HOUSE



Saturday, June 3, 1989 — Meet at Stanley School at 9:00 a.m.

Bring Picnic Lunch for Noon Picnic on Park Grounds

LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. Box 133
Lafayette, California 94549

FIRST CLASS MAIL